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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the relative impact of skills-based and whole language approaches on the listening comprehension of English as a foreign language (EFL) students with low and high listening ability levels. The subjects for the study were 96 pretested EFL students, divided into two treatment groups for 15 weeks. In the skills-based group, listening was taught as a set of discrete skills. In the whole language group, students spoke, listened, and wrote to one another about topics of their own choice and read about topics of interest to them. All subjects were posttested on a listening comprehension test of the Test of English as a Foreign Language. Statistical analyses of the listening comprehension scores revealed that training in listening skills was somewhat effective, but insufficient for developing the listening comprehension of low ability listeners, and that the whole language approach was effective only for high ability listeners. Findings suggest that instruction in listening sub-skills does not automatically lead to the improvement of listening comprehension, and that the whole language approach to teaching listening cannot work without basic skills. It is concluded that these two methods are not mutually exclusive but tend to complement one another. The goal should be to achieve a balance between the two approaches in heterogeneous classrooms. This would also enable the teacher to move from more closely-controlled exercises to more student-directed activities. (Contains 84 references.) (KFT)

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Effects of Skills-Based Versus Whole Language Approach on the Comprehension of EFL Students with Low and High Listening Ability Levels

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The purpose of this study was to determine the relative impact of the skills-based and whole language approaches on the listening comprehension of EFL students with low and high listening ability levels. The subjects for the study were 96 students voluntarily enrolled in an English language course at the School of education in Suez, Suez Canal University, Egypt. These subjects were identified by listening ability as either low or high ability listeners, based on scores from a placement test. They were then randomly assigned to the two treatment conditions with the same number of low and high ability listeners in each condition. In the skills-based condition, listening was taught as a set of discrete skills. In the whole language condition, students spoke, listened, and wrote to one another about topics of their own choice. They also read about topics of interest to them and shared their readings with one another. The study lasted for a fifteen-week period, at the rate of one session per week. At the end of this period, all subjects were posttested on a listening comprehension test of the TOEFL. Statistical analyses of the listening comprehension scores revealed that training in listening skills was somewhat effective, but insufficient for developing the listening comprehension of low ability listeners and that the whole language approach was effective for only high ability listeners. Implications of these findings and areas for further research were stated.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to compare the effects of skills-based versus whole language approach on the listening comprehension of EFL students with low and high listening ability levels. Specifically, the following question was addressed in the study: What effect does the use of the skills-based approach, as compared to the whole language approach, have on the listening comprehension of EFL students with low and high listening ability levels?

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Though listening to English as a foreign language has recently become an important communication activity, it is still largely neglected in Egyptian schools and universities. This neglect is largely due to the fact that no agreement exists regarding what listening entails, and how it can be taught. It is hoped that this study will offer suggestions in these two areas to better prepare Egyptian students for coping with the global society which is shifting from the eye and the printed page to the ear and the spoken word in the use of English as a foreign language.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over the last two decades, the teaching of listening has been swayed by two major approaches: (1) the skills-based approach, and (2) the whole language approach. The skills-based approach drew its theoretical roots from behavioral psychology and structural linguistics. Specifically, it is based on the following principles: (1) The whole is equal to the sum of its parts; (2) There are differences between spoken and written language; (3) Oral language acquisition precedes the development of literacy; (4) Language is a conditioned verbal behavior; (5) Language learning is no more than the formation of habits by means of stimulus-response conditioning; and (6) Students'

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errors are just like sins which should be avoided and eliminated at all cost. In light of these principles, many language teaching theoreticians view listening as a collection of micro-skills that should be mastered gradually and individually through direct explanation, modeling and repetition (e.g., Biederstadt, 1995; Brown and Hilferty, 1986, 1987; DeHaven, 1988; Dunkel, 1991; Field, 1997; Folse, 1995; George, 1990; Gilbert, 1995; Lund, 1990; Lundsteen, 1989; Peterson, 1991; Richards, 1983; Rivers, 1981; Rixon, 1986; Rubin, 1990; Taylor, 1981; Thompson, 1995; White, 1998; Wipf, 1984). Such theoreticians also hold that the mastery of each micro-skill should be measured by means of objective type exercises (e.g., binary-choice items, multiple-choice items, true or false items) before moving to the next. Advocates of such a skills-based approach claim that the teaching of listening as discrete subskills makes it easy because it spares students from tackling the complexity that this skill entails. They also claim that this approach is easy to implement. However, this approach was the subject of many criticisms on the part of some language teaching theoreticians. One of these criticisms is that the teaching of language as isolated skills divorces it from its real and functional use in society (Norris and Hoffman, 1993; Reutzel and Hollingsworth, 1988). A second criticism is that it is difficult for the brain to store bits and pieces of information for a long time (Anderson, 1984). A third criticism is that the teaching of language as isolated skills takes so much classroom time that little time is left for students to use these skills (Eldredge, 1995; Norris and Hoffman, 1993; Reutzel and Cooter, 1992).

In response to recent theories in cognitive psychology and sociolinguistics, the whole language approach emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. The evolution of this approach was, to a large extent, a revolt against the skills-based approach. The basic principles underlying this new approach are the following: (1) The whole is more than the sum of its parts; (2) Language learning is a social process; (3) Learning is student-centered and process-oriented; (4) Language learning involves relating new information to prior knowledge; (5) Oral and written language are acquired simultaneously and have reciprocal effect on each other; and (6) Students' errors are signals of progress in language learning (For more detailed descriptions of the whole language principles, see Doake, 1994; Dudley-Marling, 1995; Freeman and Freeman, 1992, 1994; Newman and Church, 1990). In light of these principles, whole language theoreticians hold that all aspects of listening interrelate as people strive to make sense of what they hear (Bolser, 1991; Craddock and Halpren, 1988; Ellermeyer, 1993; Vance, 1990). Such theoreticians also hold that students should be given the opportunity to simultaneously use all language arts (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in meaningful, functional, and cooperative activities (Carrasquillo, 1993; Freeman and Freeman, 1992; Farris and Kaczmarski, 1988; Goodman, 1989). These activities center around topics that build upon students' background knowledge (Edelsky, Altwerger, and Flores, 1991; Freeman and Freeman, 1994).These topics are often selected by the students themselves (Pahl and Monson, 1992). With regard to assessment and evaluation, whole language theoreticians claim that the contextualized nature of language obtained through observations and sampling provides a more realistic view of a student language than standardized tests (Norris and Hoffman, 1993). They further claim that students should evaluate themselves for the purpose of adding to their learning experiences (Lewis, 1997). Advocates of such a whole language approach assert that there are many advantages that can be attributed to this approach. One of these advantages is that it respects students' prior knowledge, which can in turn encourage and foster comprehension. As Vance (1990) puts it:

> The whole language teacher brings to each student a deep respect for his or her existing prior knowledge as well as a strong desire to expand that child's wealth of knowledge and experience, and therefore his or her power to truly comprehend. Respect for each child's prior knowledge and experience provides a basis for encouraging and fostering comprehension. (p. 175)

Another advantage of the whole language approach is that it subsides behavior problems (Weaver, 1990, 1994; Doake, 1994). As Weaver (1990), for example, puts it:

> In whole language classrooms, typically there are few behavior problems, not only because students are more actively involved in learning but because students are given the opportunity to develop self-control rather than merely submit to teacher control. Instead of controlling children by their demands, whole language teachers develop learning communities characterized by mutual respect and trust—communities in which many decisions are made cooperatively, and students have numerous opportunities to make individual choices and take responsibility for their own learning. In such environments, learning flourishes and behavior problems subside. (p. 25)

Still another advantage of the whole language approach is that it boosts students self-esteem (Freeman and Freeman, 1994; Weaver, 1994). As Freeman and Freeman(1994) put it:

> When bilingual students are involved in a learner-centered curriculum, teachers focus on what their students can do rather than what they cannot do. This process builds student self-esteem and also raises teacher's expectations. (p. 247)

A final advantage of the whole language approach is that it develops students creativity and critical thinking which are crucial for developing listening comprehension. Weaver (1990) puts this advantage as follows:

> ... students in whole language classrooms are thinkers and doers, not merely passive recipients of information. They learn to think critically and creatively and to process and evaluate information and ideas rather than merely to accept them. (pp. 26-27)

However, opponents of the whole language approach argue that this approach neglects accuracy although many language teaching theoreticians and researchers agree that accuracy is an essential element in language development (e.g., Eldredge, 1991, 1995; Goldenberg, 1991). A second argument against the whole language approach, according to two of its proponents (Freeman and Freeman, 1992), is that "it won't be easy to implement, and there will be resistance to many practices consistent with whole language" (p. 9). A third argument against this approach is that it over-estimates FL students' ability to select, regulate, and direct what they learn. A fourth argument is that this approach is time-consuming and requires considerable staff development (Danehower, 1993).

The foregoing suggests that just like the skills-based approach, the whole language approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, there is a need to determine which one of these approaches is more effective in teaching English as a foreign language. In response to this need, the present study compares the effects of these two approaches on the listening comprehension of Egyptian EFL students with low and high listening ability levels.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The following were the hypotheses addressed in the study: (1) There would be no statistically significant difference in the posttest mean scores between the skills-based instruction low cell and the whole language low cell. (2) There would be no statistically significant difference in the posttest mean scores between the skills-based instruction high cell and the whole language high cell.

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

A survey of research related to the problem under investigation revealed that only one study was conducted in this area. In this study, Stelly (1991) examined the effects of the whole language approach on the listening comprehension of fourth-year high school students of French and on their attitudes toward learning French as a foreign language, as opposed to the skills-based approach. The data for the study were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. The quantitative results showed a statistically significant difference in favor of the whole language approach, and the qualitative data corroborated this evidence. The quantitative results further showed a statistically significant difference in favor of the skills-based approach on attitude measures, but the qualitative data did not support this finding.

As indicated above, there is a scarcity of experimental research on the effects of skills-based versus whole language approach on the listening comprehension of EFL students. This underscores the need for further research in this area.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The subjects for the study were 96 Egyptian EFL students. These subjects were selected from a population of 142 students who voluntarily enrolled in an English language course at Suez School of Education during the 1999/2000 academic year. Selection was based on scores from a placement test. Those who scored 30 and above were designated as high ability listeners; those who scored 15 or below were designated as low ability listeners; and those who scored between 15 and 30 were excluded from taking part in the experiment. All subjects spent 9 to 12 years learning English as a foreign language. And all ranged between 19-22 years of age.

Research personnel

Two English language teachers participated in the study. They were pursuing the Master's Degree in TEFL from the School of Education in Suez. Both had about 5 years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language. And both were trained in implementing the two instructional approaches and exchanged conditions at the midpoint of the study. Two Ph.D. students also participated as observers for teachers' behaviors in the two treatment conditions. Both observers attended training sessions in

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identifying skills-based and whole language behaviors until their interrater reliability was over 90%, using the Harris and Lakey method (1978).

Materials

The instructional materials for the skills-based treatment were drawn from different sources. These materials were composed of 15 skills-based lessons for each of the four language skills. The listening lessons centered around the following micro-skills: (1) Identifying isolated speech sounds; (2) Identifying stressed syllables in individual words; (3) Identifying reduced forms in individual utterances; (4) Identifying stressed words in individual utterances; (5) Recognizing intonation patterns in individual utterances; (6) Recognizing subject-verb agreement in individual utterances; (7) Recognizing word order in isolated utterances; (8) Recognizing markers of coherence in spoken discourse; (9) Identifying main ideas and supporting details in spoken discourse; (10) Recognizing bias in spoken discourse; (11) Recognizing techniques of persuasion in spoken discourse; (12) Distinguishing reality from fantasy in spoken discourse; (13) Identifying conflict and resolution in spoken discourse; (14) Identifying mood in spoken discourse; and (15) Recognizing a point of view in spoken discourse. The lessons used for teaching the other language skills (speaking, reading, and writing) also centered around what is assumed to be the components of each skill.

The materials for the whole language treatment centered around self-selected topics. They also included articles that accommodate a wide range of students' interests. These articles were drawn from books, magazines, and newspapers, and then displayed in the whole language classroom before the start of the study.

Instruments

Two listening instruments were used in this study. The first instrument was a placement test developed by the researcher. This test was used to separate students into listening ability levels. It consisted of 50 multiple-choice items. These items were designed to test discrete listening subskills such as recognition of individual sounds, reduced forms, stress and intonation patterns, based on short spoken texts. The content of this test was validated in terms of its purpose by a panel of 5 university teachers. The internal consistency reliability for this test was found to be 0.80. The second instrument was a listening comprehension test of the TOEFL. This test was administered to all subjects at the end of the study. Two observation instruments were also used in the study: one for skills-based treatment (Appendix A) and the other for whole language treatment (Appendix B).

Description of variables

The independent variable of the study was the type of instructional approach with two treatments: (1) skills-based treatment, and (2) whole language treatment. In the skills-based treatment, students received explicit instruction in the subskills of the four language skills, at the rate of one session per week. The steps followed in the teaching of each subskill were: (1) direct explanation, (2) modeling, and (3) having students do objective type exercises. The teaching of listening took up 25% of each session and the remaining time was devoted to the teaching of speaking, reading, and writing (an hour for each).

In the whole language treatment, students were divided into groups. Each group consisted of two high and two low ability listeners. In each group, students spoke, listened, and wrote to one another about a topic of their own choice during the weekly 4-hour session. Each group member also read about a topic of interest to her/him and shared what s/he read with the other members of the group. Meanwhile, the teacher played the role of a counselor or facilitator.

The dependent variable for the study was the listening comprehension of EFL students with low and high listening ability levels as measured by a listening comprehension test of the TOEFL.

Procedures

The study took place during the 1999/2000 academic year from mid-November to mid-April. Prior to the start of the study, the instructional materials were selected by the researcher and revised by a panel of 4 university teachers in terms of the principles underlying the two approaches used in the study. Then, based on scores from the placement test, the subjects for the study were assigned to the two treatment conditions on a stratified random basis, ensuring that low ability students were balanced for total score in both conditions, and that high ability students were just the same. After that, students in both treatment conditions were taught by the two participating teachers, at the rate of one session per week. During the course of the study, analyses of the observation scores indicated that the two approaches were being properly implemented. At the end of the study, the subjects were posttested on a listening comprehension test of the TOEFL. Finally, the listening comprehension scores were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Norušis, 1993).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The listening comprehension scores were compared for each listening ability level under the skills-based and whole language conditions. The t-test was utilized to determine significance at the 0.05 level of confidence. The findings are presented in the Table below.

The T-Value of the Difference in the Mean Scores for Each Listening Ability Level Under the Skills-Based and Whole Language Conditions

Listening Ability Level	Treatment						T-value
	Skills-Based			Whole-Language			
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Low	24	17.42	3.01	24	16.50	2.38	1.17
High	24	36.83	2.81	24	39.13	2.63	2.92

As shown in the Table above, the skills-based instruction low cell scored slightly higher than the whole language low cell, but the difference was not significant at the 0.05 level ($t = 1.17$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the first hypothesis, stating that there would be no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the skills-based instruction low cell and the whole language low cell, was accepted. This result suggests that training

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in listening skills is somewhat effective, but insufficient for developing listening comprehension. It also suggests that without basic skills, students cannot take control of their own learning or provide themselves with truly appropriate input for developing their listening comprehension. This result seems to have been due to three reasons. First, the lack of listening ability might prevent students from interacting with and benefiting from high ability students under the whole language condition. Second, the lack of prescribed materials under the whole language condition might increase the anxiety of low ability students, which could, in turn, act as a block to the improvement of their listening skill. Third, the skills-based instruction might meet those students' needs and interests.

The results further showed that the whole language high cell scored significantly higher than the skills-based instruction high cell ($t = 2.92$, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, the second hypothesis, stating that there would be no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the whole language high cell and the skills-based instruction high cell, was rejected. This result suggests that the whole language approach is effective for only high ability listeners and that excessive concern for accuracy does not develop comprehension. This result is due to the fact that high ability listeners possess the basic skills that enabled them to monitor their learning, engage themselves in intellectually challenging activities, and take full advantage of the freedom given to them in using the basic skills they had. In contrast, the skills-based instruction did not give those students the opportunity to meaningfully use these skills.

LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study are limited to EFL students at the university level, the materials used for both treatments, and the operationalizations of the dependent and independent variables. Within these limitations, the findings of the study suggest that instruction in listening subskills does not automatically lead to the improvement of listening comprehension and that the whole language approach to teaching listening cannot work without basic skills. It appears, therefore, that the skills-based and whole language approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather tend to complement one another. Therefore, we should seek to achieve a balance between the two approaches within heterogeneous classrooms. In such classrooms, the teacher should move from closely-controlled exercises to student-directed activities. This balanced approach is consistent with the thinking of many scholars (e.g., Buck, 1995; Oxford, 1993; Peterson, 1991; Richards, 1990; Rost, 1992; Tsui and Fullilove, 1998). As Buck (1995), for example, points out:

> There are some skills involved in listening comprehension which are a necessary but insufficient condition for success, and students must have some mastery of these before they can tackle realistic texts....The purpose of these precommunicative activities is to isolate specific elements of communicative ability and help students to develop them. Such activities are intended as a temporary expedient, a bridge to enable students to move to full communicative activities at the earliest opportunity. (p. 123).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The first suggestion for further research concerns the replication of this study using a larger sample size over a longer period of time. The second suggestion is to examine the effects of a combination of the whole language and skills-based approaches on EFL students' listening comprehension. The third suggestion is to examine the effects of the whole language supplemented with the skills-based approach on EFL students' attitudes towards listening. The final suggestion is to examine the difficulties involved in the implementation of the whole language approach in the EFL context.

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APPENDIX A
Observation Instrument for Skills-Based Treatment

Teacher's name:----------. Date:----------.

Directions: At the end of the lesson, circle the number that best describes the level at which the teacher accomplished each item.

(1) Language is taught as separate skills.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(2) Each language skill is broken down into isolated and arbitrarily sequenced instructional subskills.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(3) Each subskill is taught through direct explanation, modeling, and repetition.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(4) Teacher focuses on form rather than meaning in teaching the four language skills.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(5) Teacher adheres closely to the instructional materials assigned to him.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(6) Listening is taught as a separate skill.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(7) Teacher uses objective type exercises (e.g., multiple choice, true or false, fill in the spaces) to measure mastery of each subskill before moving to the next.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(8) Teacher reinforces answers as right or wrong.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(9) Teacher corrects students errors immediately.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

Other comments:----------

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Signature

APPENDIX B
Observation Instrument for Whole Language Treatment

Teacher's name:----------. Date:----------.

Directions: At the end of the lesson, circle the number that best describes the level at which each item was accomplished.

(1) Students use language arts (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in meaningful, functional, and cooperative activities.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(2) Teacher respects each student's prior knowledge.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(3) Students spend 75 % of class time talking, listening, and writing to each other.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(4) Students choose the materials they desire to read.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(5) Students share what they read with one another.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(6) Listening is incorporated with other language arts.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(7) Teacher plays the role of the consultant in the classroom.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(8) Teacher uses qualitative measures to check for comprehension.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

(9) Teacher focuses on meaning rather than form.
(0) Not Accomplished (1) Partially Accomplished (2) Entirely Accomplished

Other comments:----------

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Signature